



Why Should I Limit Sodium?

You may have been told by your health care professional to reduce the sodium, or salt, in your diet. Most people eat too much sodium, often without knowing it. Reducing the amount of sodium in your diet can help you lower or avoid high blood pressure.

Your body needs sodium to work properly. It's regulated in the body by your kidneys, and it helps control your body's fluid balance. It also plays a key role in nerve and muscle function.

But too much sodium in your system causes your body to retain (hold onto) water. This may cause puffiness, bloating and weight gain.



How does too much sodium affect my heart health?

When there's extra sodium in your bloodstream, it pulls water into your blood vessels, increasing the amount of blood inside your blood vessels. With more blood flowing through your blood vessels, blood pressure increases. In some people, this may lead to or raise high blood pressure.

Having less sodium in your diet may help you lower or avoid high blood pressure, which is a major risk factor for heart disease and stroke.

How much sodium do I need?

Nine out of 10 Americans consume too much sodium. The average American eats more than 3,400 milligrams (mg) of sodium a day.

- The American Heart Association recommends no more than 2,300 mg a day and an ideal limit of less than 1,500 mg per day for most adults, especially for those with high blood pressure.
- Even cutting back by 1,000 mg a day can improve blood pressure and heart health.

What are sources of sodium?

Many foods in their natural state contain some sodium. But the largest amount of sodium comes from processed, packaged and restaurant foods.

Pay attention to food labels, because they tell how much sodium is in food products. For example: foods with 140 mg or less sodium per serving are considered low in sodium. Sodium levels of the same type of food can vary widely. Compare the Nutrition Facts labels and select the products with the lowest amount of sodium per serving.

Some over-the-counter and prescription medicines also contain lots of sodium. Ask your health care professional or pharmacist about the sodium in your medicines. Make reading the labels of all over-the-counter drugs a habit, too.

What foods should I limit?

The best way to reduce sodium is to avoid prepackaged, processed and prepared foods, which tend to be higher in sodium.

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Watch out for the “Salty 6” – the top six common foods that add the most salt to your diet.

- Breads and rolls
- Pizza
- Sandwiches
- Cold cuts and cured meats
- Soup
- Burritos and tacos

These are some other foods can also be sources of “hidden” sodium:

- Cheeses and buttermilk
- Canned vegetables
- Frozen dinners and snack foods
- Condiments (ketchup, mustard, mayonnaise)
- Sauces, such as barbecue, soy, steak and Worcestershire

How can I cook with less salt and more flavor?

- Avoid adding table salt to foods.
- Flavor foods with herbs, spices, lemon, lime, vinegar or salt-free seasoning blends.

- Use fresh poultry, fish and lean meat, rather than canned, smoked or processed types.
- Choose unsalted nuts and low-sodium canned foods.
- Cook dried peas and beans.
- Use products made without added salt. Try low-sodium bouillon and soups and unsalted broth.
- Rinse canned vegetables and beans to reduce sodium.

What about eating out?

Controlling your sodium intake doesn't mean spoiling the pleasure of eating out. But order carefully. Consider these tips for meals away from home:

- Look at the restaurant's menu before going out. Check the online nutrition information if available.
- Select fresh greens and fruits when available. Ask for oil and vinegar to top your salad or ask for the dressing on the side.
- Be specific about what you want and how you want your food prepared. Request that your dish be prepared without added salt.
- Remember portion control. You can always bring home a to-go box!

HOW CAN I LEARN MORE?

- 1 Call 1-800-AHA-USA1 (1-800-242-8721), or visit heart.org to learn more about heart disease and stroke.
- 2 Sign up for our monthly *Heart Insight* e-news for heart patients and their families at HeartInsight.org.
- 3 Connect with others sharing similar journeys with heart disease and stroke by joining our Support Network at heart.org/SupportNetwork.

Do you have questions for your doctor or nurse?

Take a few minutes to write down your questions for the next time you see your health care professional.

For example:

What's my daily sodium limit?

Is there sodium in the medicine I take?

MY QUESTIONS:

We have many other fact sheets to help you make healthier choices to reduce your risk for heart disease, manage your condition or care for a loved one. Visit heart.org/AnswersByHeart to learn more.